Serbian cities, Belgrade in particular, proved to be the battleground between the forces of the old Ottoman world and the new emerging modernity of Western Europe.

Norris's comparison of the transformation of Balkan city life with the development and role of the city in Western society is more informative than anything so far found in the existing literature on the origins of the Balkan myth. Those interested in the origins of the Yugoslav national idea can learn how it was born and why it was killed. To demonstrate these changes in city life, Norris scans a selective number of literary works and one film (Underground, 1995, directed by Emir Kusturica), but keeps his focus on Belgrade. Whereas the urban centers in the West provided public life, served as engines of production and commerce, and challenged the ruling political and religious elites, the Serbian cities under Ottoman rule provided mostly a private space, served the sultan’s military needs, and tended to defend the status quo. The city in the Ottoman empire was rather a center of consumption, not a center of entrepreneurial dynamic activity. Ever since 1804, Belgrade has never been permitted to experience its full development. The city suffered both physically and culturally every time it changed hands from one occupier to the next. It endured the most during the two world wars; and, though it was territorially outside the civil war of the 1990s, it nevertheless bore the heavy burden of embracing hundreds of thousands of refugees—all of it under the duress of the international sanctions. It is unfortunate that Norris published his manuscript a few months before the 1999 bombing of Belgrade by NATO, for the inclusion of the 1999 bombing of Belgrade and Serbia would underline Norris’s point even more.

The text is easy to read, and the content is informative. Because Norris relies on an analysis of a selective number of literary works, his endnotes, bibliography and index are relatively short. There are only a couple of typos. A more weighty problem is on pages 119-20, where the author fails in his discussion on the main characters in Milutin Uskokovic’s novel Došljaci, Miloš and Zorka, to make it clear whether Zorka is the suicide victim herself or if she is the woman Miloš meets at that same suicide scene. Otherwise, the work is timely and much needed by both academics and wide popular readership.

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Specialists on Eastern Europe can look with contempt at the carpet-baggers who rush into the region with their assumptions about the market, democracy, or international relations intact. We, at least, understand the region and its history well. But in the years since the collapse of Communism, area specialists have tended to agree on one concept: the burdens of memory. The people of Eastern Europe, we know, are struggling to reconcile their memory of the past (Communist or pre-Communist) with the realities of contemporary politics. To understand and work with those memories
(and intentional amnesia, too) is the task of East Europeans and those who study the region.

Shari Cohen, in *Politics Without a Past*, exposes this obsession with memory as yet another loaded assumption. What if, she asks provocatively, the problem is that East Europeans (most of them, at least) do not have a real memory of the past? What if nationalism, paradoxically enough in a world of nations constructed on historical consciousness, was enacted by and for those who actually knew little about their country’s past?

In her study of politics in post-Communist Slovakia, Cohen makes the claim that post-Communist societies are largely confused about their history. By this, she means that they lack the information necessary to form judgments about present-day politics. For example, the term “fascist,” which might mean a great deal to an intellectual critic of a politician like Vladimir Mečiar – the populist who ruled Slovakia in an increasingly erratic way from 1992 to 1998 – meant little to the average Slovak voter. It is not that Slovaks felt favorable toward fascism and desired to return to the past – in this case, to the semi-autonomous puppet Slovak state of 1939-45 – but that they really did not know what a fascist was. Forty-odd years of Communism had taught only that anything anti-Communist was fascist. One could not learn, from Communist textbooks or the Communist press, what fascist doctrine was or about its anti-democratic implications and the Nazis’ racist attitude toward Slavs; the Holocaust barely merited a mention.

Cohen’s greatest contribution to the literature is the concept of the “mass-elite.” The term beautifully conjures up the rapid advance of the Communist era, which brought into the technocratic and political élites the sons of peasants and workers. One thinks immediately of Slobodan Milošević, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, Leonid Kuchma: gray, faceless bureaucrats who moved effortlessly from one ideology to another, motivated only by power, not by the force of ideas. Schooled in an ideology emphasizing the role of the masses, knowing only the worldview the Communist Party had to offer, they proved to be oddly immune to the weapons democratic thinkers deployed against them. The rise, fall, rise and fall of Mečiar is an excellent example of this phenomenon. Cohen thus provides an explanation for the weakness not only of the democrats, but also of the émigrés, who assumed that all Slovaks were as aware of their own history as was the diaspora.

This is a tricky argument to make, for it is a small step to the assertion that there is a “correct” history that Slovaks (and other East Europeans) should learn – though, of course, the democrats’ version and the émigrés’ version were quite different. In one sense there is a correct history – all Slovaks should understand the role their wartime state played in the Holocaust – but Cohen at times adopts a prescriptive tone, as if to suggest that there is a packet of knowledge that enlightened Slovaks should possess. One wishes, in this light, that the “organized forgetting” of the Communist era had been explored more systematically. Cohen’s discussion of Communist textbooks, for example, is quite brief and superficial. There is probably a good deal of research that ended on the cutting-room floor, as this dissertation became a book.

Shortcomings aside, this is a provocative study of great value to historians of the Communist era in Eastern Europe as it is to students of post-Communist politics. It is